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## ABSTRACT

Symbolic self-completion theory suggests that people who are committed to a certain self-definitional goal, e.g., "psychologist," "parent," "dancer," are not willing to give up this goal when facing a shortcoming. Such individuals often engage in self-symbolizing or positive self-descriptions designed to coverup the shortcoming. To examine whether it is the non-reflective condition of the self-symbolizer which allows him to report positive self-descriptions when actual evidence suggests weakness, female undergraduates (N=55) committed to various self-definitions, received or did not receive negative feedback suggesting that their personality would hinder success in their self-definitional realms. All subjects were then asked to report on their self-perceived standing within their self-definitional realms; half of the negative feedback subjects made these self-descriptions in front of a mirror. Results showed that negative feedback subjects reported more positive self-descriptions than no feedback subjects only when not facing a mirror. In addition, negative feedback-no mirror subjects showed the lowest self-report validity. The findings suggest that positive self-descriptions serving self-definitional needs are exerted in an impulsive, non-reflective manner, and that self-reflection inducing devices such as the mirror can hinder self-symbolizing.  
(Author/PAS)

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Self Symbolizing and Self Reflection

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## Abstract

The following experiment was conducted: Female undergraduates committed to certain self-definitions (e.g., dancer, gymnast, pianist) received or did not receive feedback that their personality would hinder their success in their self-definitional realms. In a different context, all subjects were then asked to report on their self-perceived standing in their self-definitional realms. Half of the negative feedback subjects made these self-descriptions in front of a mirror. Negative feedback subjects reported more positive self-descriptions than no feedback subjects only when not facing a mirror. In addition, negative feedback-no mirror subjects showed the lowest self-report validity. The results are interpreted in terms of a recent notion of symbolic self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981) which suggests that positive self-descriptions serving self-definitional needs are exerted in an impulsive, non-reflective manner.

Symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981) suggests that people who are actively striving for a standard of excellence in a certain self-definitional realm, i.e., are committed to a certain self-definitional goal, are not willing to give up this goal when facing a shortcoming. Rather, committed individuals are expected to engage in behaviors, called self-symbolizing, that are designed to cover up this shortcoming. Since self-defining goals (e.g., "psychologist," "Republican," or "parent") are characterized by a large number of indicators of goal attainment, there are usually numerous routes to self-symbolizing. A "psychotherapist" for instance, can self-symbolize by making her academic degree more salient, by increasing the number of her clients, or simply by describing herself to others as competent and qualified. Public self-descriptions are obviously the most economical route of self-symbolizing and were therefore employed in prior self-completion experiments (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, study 4; Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, in press; Gollwitzer & Wicklund, Note 1). In each of these experiments it was observed that subjects responded to a manipulated lack of completeness regarding a certain self-definition (e.g., negative personality feedback) with enhanced positive self-descriptions. In the two studies reported by Gollwitzer and Wicklund (Note 1) it could be shown that incomplete subjects not only reported more positive self-descriptions than complete subjects but

that, in addition, their responsitivity to social cues in the self-descriptive situation was comparatively low, i.e., incomplete subjects simply served self-definitional needs and disregarded the request and needs of others when they exerted their self-descriptions.

Accordingly, one could describe the self-symbolizing person as non-reflective, impulsively pursuing one single goal, i.e., the goal of winning back lost completeness. Furthermore, it might be that it is this non-reflective condition of the self-symbolizer that allows him to report positive self-descriptions when actual evidence suggests weakness. The present experiment is designed to test this hypothesis.

We reasoned that if it would be possible to push self-symbolizing subjects into a reflective psychological state, the quality of their self-reports should become less positive and, second, the veridicality of the self-reports should go up. That is, they should be coordinated to observable criteria that could be known to others.

The design of the present study incorporated the following three conditions: Subjects in the No Mirror condition first received negative personality feedback relevant to their respective self-definitional realms and then--in a presumed second experiment--were asked for self-descriptions. Via these self-descriptions, subjects could claim a positive or negative standing vis-a-vis their respective

self-definitions. In the Mirror condition subjects received negative personality feedback and then made their self-descriptions in front of a mirror. In the Control condition subjects simply reported their self-descriptions without having received any feedback regarding their personality.

The predictions are as follows: No Mirror subjects should respond to the negative personality feedback with self-symbolizing (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, Note 1). Accordingly, the self-descriptions of No Mirror subjects should be more positive than those of Control subjects not receiving any personality feedback. In addition, the self-symbolizing efforts of the No Mirror subjects should reduce the veridicality of their self-reports, i.e., the correlation between educational background and/or amount of experience in the self-definitional realm and the positivity of self-descriptions should be less positive for No Mirror subjects as compared to Control subjects. Finally, given that self-directed attention induced by a mirror can be construed as a self-reflective state (Duval & Wicklund, 1972), it was expected that self-symbolizing after the negative personality feedback would be attenuated in the Mirror condition. Self-directed attention has previously been shown to reduce the positivity of self-descriptions (cf. Ickes, Wicklund, Ferris, 1973) and accordingly, Mirror subjects' self-descriptions were expected to be less positive than the descriptions given by No Mirror subjects. In addition, much

as previous studies have demonstrated that self-focused attention increases self-report validity (Pryor, Gibbons, Wicklund, Fazio, & Hood, 1977) we expected that Mirror subjects would be more apt to coordinate their self-descriptions to their educational background and/or experience than No Mirror subjects.

### Subjects and Procedure

Female undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology courses were pretested at the beginning of the semester, and were asked to indicate an activity area in which they were especially interested. In addition, they had to record how many years ago they had begun this activity and how many years of formal education they had received in the activity. Fifty-five female undergraduates committed to various self-definitions (e.g., dancer, gymnast, pianist, mathematician) were invited to participate in the study after it was established that the subjects had been active in the activity within the time period of 14 days prior to the experiment (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981).

When subjects came to the laboratory (in pairs) they met Experimenter 1, who introduced himself as a "personality psychologist." The experimenter explained that he wanted to find out whether undergraduate females interested in certain activity areas have a personality that is similar to or different from the personality of successful people in these

fields. Subjects filled out a personality questionnaire (semantic differential format) and the experimenter then drew, what was ostensibly, the ideal personality onto the subjects' questionnaires. All subjects who received feedback (Mirror and No Mirror conditions) found that they were highly dissimilar from the ideal. Subjects in the Control condition did not take the personality questionnaire. The experimenter explained that he had already collected enough data from the particular activity area to which subjects were committed and, therefore, it would not be necessary for them to fill out the questionnaire.

The pair of subjects was then introduced to a "social psychologist" who was to use the remainder of the experimental hour to conduct another short experiment. Experimenter 2 guided the subjects to a different floor and stated his research concern. He said he would be studying effective ways of teaching newcomers to certain activity areas. He then asked subjects about their activity areas and stated that people who are already active in a certain activity area have turned out to be most valuable in giving advice to newcomers. He then said that he would like them to write down a number of hints on how to get started in the activity area to which they were committed. It was explained further that he would show these hints to undergraduates who were not committed to this particular activity, thus testing the effectiveness of subjects' advice. However, he

would like to be able to say something about the people who give these hints. Therefore, subjects were asked to fill out a self-description form that could be attached to the page containing their instructional advice.

At this point the experimenter handed out the self-description form. Subjects in the Mirror condition completed the self-description form in a cubicle in which mirrors were attached to the wall. No Mirror subjects, just as Control subjects, were not confronted with a mirror. When subjects were finished with their self-descriptions they were debriefed and dismissed.

### Results and Discussion

Positivity of self-descriptions. The self-description form asked subjects (a) to indicate their percentile standing in their field; (b) to estimate their public respect, and (c) to guess their popularity in their respective fields. These items were combined into a self-description index (Standardized Item Alpha = .72). An ANOVA on this index reveals a significant effect across the three conditions ( $p < .01$ ). Contrasts show that the No Mirror condition differs significantly from the Mirror condition ( $p < .002$ ) as well as from the Control condition ( $p < .05$ ). No Mirror

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Table 1 about here  
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subjects make significantly more positive self-descriptions than Control subjects. And Mirror subjects report self-descriptions that are even less positive than those of Control subjects.

We would like to interpret the present data pattern in terms of the symbolic self-completion idea. Negative feedback subjects (i.e., No Mirror and Mirror subjects) should have experienced incompleteness with a consequent motivation to engage in self-symbolizing in the form of positive self-descriptions. These efforts were curtailed, however, when subjects found themselves in a condition that favored self-reflection (i.e., faced a mirror). Self-symbolizing, as an impulsive non-reflective activity, seems to be severely hampered when self-reflection is induced.

Veridicality of self-descriptions. At the outset of the semester we had asked potential subjects how many years of education they had received in their activity areas and how many years ago they had taken up these activities. We reasoned that a high number of years of being active in a certain activity area should provide the subject with a comparatively strong sense of completeness in the particular area. And from a straight-forward consistency assumption, one would expect the more competent subjects to describe themselves more positively. Thus one would generally expect subjects with a strong background, in terms of education and experience, to come up with more positive self-descriptions.

Since years-of-education and years-of-experience correlated rather highly with each other ( $r = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ ) we combined these variables via z-scores into a "background security" index. Correlating this index with subjects' self-descriptions, separately for each condition, reveals the following: Subjects in the Control condition show a positive correlation between background security and positivity of self-description, indicating that subjects with a strong background simply describe themselves as being stronger than do subjects with a weak background. Interestingly, this correlation turns negative in the No Mirror condition in which subjects received negative personality feedback, but were not confronted with a mirror.

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 Table 2 about here  
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The pattern of these correlational data parallels the data we obtained when looking at the mean positivity of subjects' self-descriptions. It would appear that self-symbolizing reduces the veridicality of self-reports. In the negative feedback condition in which self-symbolizing is expected to occur (No Mirror condition), negative correlations are obtained. But in the Mirror condition, in which self-symbolizing is hindered, the correlation between background and positivity of self-descriptions returns to the positive value found in the Control condition.

In summary, the present data show that self-reflection inducing devices can hinder self-symbolizing. It appears, then, that self-symbolizing is a non-reflective activity geared toward a particular function, that of marshalling symbolic evidence for one's self-definition. Inducing self-reflection hinders self-symbolizing efforts and consequently reduces the negative, or asocial consequences of self-symbolizing. The negative consequence studied in the present experiment is low veridicality of self-reports, and it was shown that self-reflection inducing devices can successfully reverse this effect.

## Reference Notes

Gollwitzer, P. M., & Wicklund, R. A. Disrespect for the other as a consequence of self-symbolizing. Unpublished manuscript, University of Texas at Austin, 1981.

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Table 1  
Mean Positivity of Self-Descriptions

| Self-description<br>index | Conditions       |                    |                   |
|---------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
|                           | No mirror        | Mirror             | Control           |
|                           | .91 <sup>A</sup> | -1.42 <sup>B</sup> | -.59 <sup>B</sup> |
|                           | (19)             | (18)               | (18)              |

Note: ns in parentheses. Scores with no superscript in common differ from each other at least at the .05 significance level.

Table 2  
Veridicality of Self-Descriptions: The Relation Between  
Background Security and Positivity of  
Self-Descriptions

| Veridicality of<br>self-descriptions | Conditions  |             |             |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|                                      | No mirror   | Mirror      | Control     |
|                                      | .27<br>(17) | .31<br>(18) | .43<br>(18) |

Note: ns in parentheses. The correlation coefficient in the No Mirror condition differs from the correlation coefficient in the Control condition at the .03 level of significance. The difference between the No Mirror condition and the Mirror condition only approaches significance ( $p < .08$ ).